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Adieu Mata Hari, Cloak and Dagger

By Walter Laqueur

This has been a season of defections and mishaps for the secret services in Europe, raising perturbing questions for spy masters in the West and even more so in the East.

West German counterintelligence has to be rebuilt more or less from scratch in the wake of the defection, in August, of the high-ranking officer Hans Joachim Tiedge, and there is no reason to assume that the last moles in Bonn have been flushed out. The discovery of French Government complicity in the sinking of the Greenpeace ship has made it necessary for the French to get rid of the director general of their secret service.

But there is no rejoicing these days in K.G.B. headquarters either: No fewer than three high-level Soviet spies have defected in the last few months, and Soviet defections weigh 10 times as heavily as Western ones. Western society is, after all, open and easy to penetrate; political secrets virtually do not exist. The Soviet Union is a closed society, and breaches of security are much more damaging. Besides, even if the K.G.B. were only half as good as its

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reputation, it should have known that Vitaly Yurchenko, who defected in Rome in July, had been a double agent for more than a decade.

Even worse, the K.G.B. must also worry now about whether or not its agents are corruptible. It is unlikely that this summer's defections were the last. There was a time when Soviet agents abroad were deeply motivated. But their place has been taken by a new generation of spies who are better educated and more skeptical about ideology. Opportunism seems to play an increasing role, reinforced by doubts about the regime they serve, and it cannot be taken for granted that all will resist the temptations of the decadent West.

How significant are these incidents for either side? There is a tendency among the public at large to exaggerate both successes and failures in intelligence, largely because few people have a clear conception of what intelligence can and cannot do. Intelligence is not an end in itself and does not have a life of its own; the consequences of a certain operation can be assessed only in a wider context.

Consider three examples. Pearl Harbor was the greatest intelligence failure in American history — and yet without it the American people might never have been galvanized into a major war effort.

Second, some 20 years ago, the East Germans planted an agent close to Willy Brandt. They must have thought this a fantastic success, but

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in the end it worked against them, when the agent was caught and Mr. Brandt (whom they liked) had to resign, allowing the chancellorship to go to Helmut Schmidt (whom they liked much less).

Finally, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems that we much overestimated the damage caused by Kim Philby and the other British spies of the 1940's. They did, to a certain extent, nullify British intelligence-gathering efforts: As a result of their work, man hours were wasted, money squandered and perhaps some lives lost. But they had not the slightest impact on policy making in Whitehall. Nor is it likely that they knew very much about the intentions of their masters. For better or worse, presidents, prime ministers and chiefs of staff rarely take intelligence agents into their confidences.

Does this mean that intelligence no longer matters? Far from it. True, the Russians do not need spies to find out about President Reagan's view of the Soviet Union; they can read about it in the press. But cloak and dagger are no longer the symbols of espionage, and the main practitioners no longer resemble Mata Hari. The name of the game today is technology — guidance technology, missile defense, anti-submarine warfare and computer technology in general.

Advanced large-scale integrated-circuit design, magnetic bubble-memory technology, genetic engineering, fracture mechanics and superplasticity — these are hardly household words, but they are all technologies with considerable military value, and this is where most of today's spy power is invested.

In this new world, Soviet and American intelligence agencies face radically different tasks. The United States needs political intelligence from societies where such information is not forthcoming. It is therefore preoccupied with verification and strategic deception. It has some interest in Soviet technology but nothing like the Soviet Union's overwhelming concern with the acquisition of high technology from the West. True, the Russians also want as full a picture as possible about everything happening in the West, but given the extent of what is readily available to

them, such information is very often irrelevant and their efforts to gather it no more than a nuisance.

The secretaries from the West German Government who defected to the East this summer are cases in point — mere pawns on the board of what Kipling once called the "great game." These women may have delivered fascinating tidbits about personal rivalries within the West German Cabinet or even perhaps about some military contingency plans that will never be used in any case. This will keep the filing clerks in East Berlin and Moscow busy, but in the final analysis, it is about as senseless as what the French did in New Zealand. The real action and the big money have long ago moved elsewhere. □